

The Golden Calf and the God of Israel

Exodus 32:1-34:35

Something always gets lost in translation. You have probably noticed this in reading directions for putting something together.

Israel apparently missed something in the *10 Words* about other gods and making idols. The primary purpose of God in the exodus was that he would be known. The calf is in the opposite direction of knowing God.

Sinai was a giant step forward in the revelation of God, but Sinai did not answer the problem of sin. The reality of sin begs the question, *How can a holy God live among a sinful people?*

Exodus 32-34 gives us, yet, a further revelation of the nature and character of God. The resolution of the text comes in Exodus 34:6-7. God will dwell among a *stiff-necked* people by forgiving their sin! So, how can a holy God live among a sinful people? He will forgive their sin.

This brings up a whole other issue. How can a holy God forgive sin? That question is not answered directly in this text. It will take a New Covenant to answer that question. However, the Pentateuch wants us to feel this tension because it is prophetic and begs us to look to Christ.

So chapters 32-34 give the occasion for a fuller revelation of God. This passage will reveal that God is merciful and forgiving.

1. Israel's Sin: our sin is an issue with which God must deal.

Israel's sin gives us the setting for a further revelation of God. Sin is a thing. God must deal with sin because it is contrary to his nature and character. It is high treason against God. So far in Exodus, Israel's sin has not been dealt with. In fact the topic has been strangely absent.

That is until now. Prior to Exodus 32-34, sin has been mentioned 10 times. None of which is relation to Israel's sin. In chapters 32-34, it is mentioned 11 times (*hata* 32:21,30x2,31,32,34; 34:7,9; *avon* 34:7,9; *pesa* 34:7) using three different words, *iniquity*, *transgression*, and *sin* (34:7 uses all three)—heart bent to sin, willful rebellion, and missing the mark or coming short.

After the giving of the *10 words and the rules* (Ex. 20-23), Moses was called up on the Mountain into the glory cloud to receive the tablets of stone (24:12-18). He was there for forty days and forty nights. While Moses was on the mountain in the cloud, the golden calf event occurs.

Imagine this: On the very same day, Israel gathered mana and bowed to a calf, attributing to it their exodus from Egypt (32:4).

Confronting Israel with their sin was inevitable. They looked like pagans with their ornaments that they would use to support their idolatry (32:2-4; 33:5). Israel did not suddenly become idolatrous in Exodus 32. They were idolaters at heart. Their sin is not so much because they wanted a God they could see. Good grief, all they had to do was look up on the mountain to see the cloud that received Moses, the same cloud that led them from Egypt to Sinai.

No. They wanted autonomy. They wanted a god they could control. This is rebellion pure and simple. They wanted to chart their own course. You can hear the rebellion in 32:1.

The language of this text shows us they are in direct rebellion against the *Words* that God had given them. The writer is at pains to show the calf as a direction violation of the covenant. In the preamble to the *Words*, God identified himself as, *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery* (20:2). So obey him.

Israel attributed what God had done to the gods represented by the calf: *These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt* (32:4b).ⁱ So obey them. If the situation could not have gotten worse, Aaron made it worse by proclaiming a *feast to the LORD*, as if to say, *this is YHWH* (32:5). So they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings to the calf. The only other time in the book of Exodus when burnt offerings and peace offerings are made is in the covenant ratification ceremony in 24:4-8.

The only assessment of sin that matters is God's take on sin. The LORD gave Moses his assessment of Israel's sin, *Your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves* (32:7). *They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"* (32:8b).

You can excuse sin. You can find people who will applaud you for sin. You can call sin good and good sin. In the end, whatever you call it and how you think of it does not change what it is. In fact, you have to create a whole different God than the one who has revealed himself to rationalize sin.

The NARAL's (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League) motto at a recent campaign rally was *Demand Justice*. Seriously, for whom? What about the potential that child would have had? I often say, *God has sent us the cure for cancer a million times. We simply keep aborting it.* That, however, is the sin of the world, right?

What about the sins of those in the church? God is the God who deals with all of our sin. In this text, he deals with Israel's iniquity, transgression, and sin—that is, from the sinful action itself to the root causes in the heart.

If you are a believer and you can't stop clicking the porn link, understand you have an underlying problem in your heart bigger than porn, and that demon has to go. We could go on with the big sins. They are the easy ones. They may look like mountains to you now, but as you drive toward those hills they are moving and revealing things to you that you have not yet seen. You may find in your heart deep-seated anger, an unhealed wound, an insatiable envy, a prideful self-pity or self-exaltation. You may find your life dominated by forces that you can't seem to escape. God is going to free you from those sins.

God will deal with all of your sin. He will not be satisfied until the good work he has started in you is completed in the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

2. Moses' intercession: prayer will be shaped by our understanding of the nature and character of God

Exodus 32-34 has 4 rounds of intercession from Moses (32:11-13; 32:31b-32; 33:12-18; 34:9). Moses intercession arises from God's rejection of Israel as his people (*your people* 32:7 cf. 33:1) and his intention to consume them and make a great nation of Moses (32:9-10). Moses' intercession was shaped by who he understood God to be. Moses' intercession was God-centered. We cannot expect that God will act contrary to his nature and character.

A. First petition (32:11-13): Prayer should center on the purpose and promise of God—the Word of God.

When God ordered Moses to *Go down* because of the people's idolatry (32:7-8), before Moses could respond, the LORD added, *let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you* (32:10). Moses immediately interceded, *O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt* (32:11).

The sense of what the LORD said to Moses is, *The only thing standing between me consuming them and making you Abraham II is you.* Moses heard an invitation to intercede on behalf of the Israel for the sake of God's reputation among the nations and his promise to Abraham. Moses did not plead for Israel primarily for the sake of Israel but for the sake of God. He did not argue the goodness of Israel but the reputation and promise of God.

God's purpose in the Exodus was to make himself known. Moses reminds the LORD of his purpose by grabbing the language of Exodus 9:16, *You brought them out with great power...(32:11).* God had sent word to Pharaoh, *For this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my **power**, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.* What was at stake in consuming Israel was the global reputation of God (32:12).

If that was not enough, Moses ran to the promise. Moses' point is that God swore *by himself* to multiply Abraham offspring as the stars...(32:13). Starting over with Moses contradicts that promise. Moses argues in effect, *They are your people; you have bound yourself to them.*

You see the basis for Moses' first petition. He is pleading with the LORD for the LORD. God relents because consuming Israel is not consistent with his purpose and will (32:14). You see how your understanding of the God impacts your prayer, indeed your effectiveness in prayer.

B. Second petition (32:31b-32): Prayers are corrected by the nature and character of God.

After the first round of prayer, Moses descended the mountain, broke the tablets (32:15-19), destroyed the calf (32:20), confronted Aaron (32:21-24), and led the Levites in terminating the guilty (32:25-29).

The next day Moses confronted Israel with their sin and set out to go before the LORD to see if, *perhaps*, he could make atonement for their sin (32:30). Moses is not nearly as confident with what he is about to do as he was with the first intercession.

Moses confessed the sin of the people to the LORD (32:31), then, comes his petition. *If you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out or your book that you have written (32:32).*

Moses is asking God simply to take Israel's sin away (*nasa*), that is to unburden them of their offense and the punishment for it. The basis for removing Israel's sin is, *if you won't forgive them, then blot me out of your book (32:32).* Moses seems to be offering himself in exchange for Israel.

Something is missing in his understanding of sin, holiness, atonement, and the nature and character of God. God can't just overlook sin. Atonement must be made and justice must be satisfied, but Moses can do none of the above.

The LORD graciously denied his request: *Whoever sinned against me, I will blot out of my book* (32:33). The LORD's answer is, *No. I will not forgive them, and I will not blot you out of my book*. Moses is in no position to offer himself as an atonement for sin.

God in his kindness will not give his children a stone when they ask for bread. I have often heard, *Be careful what you pray for*. I get it, ok. But that is a total mischaracterization of God. No. By all means pray, but understand that prayer is a school house not a lottery. The more we learn of God, the more effective our prayer will be. We are all too willing to stand in the way of the LORD's purpose.

C. Third petition (33:12-18): Persevere in prayer until you lay hold of God's willingness.

Unanswered prayer is no reason to quit praying, but rather to persevere until you lay hold of God's willingness.

The central issue of the third intercession is the LORD's presence with Israel (33:1-3). The LORD had been meeting with Moses outside the camp in a tent that Moses would pitch (33:7-11). This interlude slows the action to give an inside look at these realities in real-time. There the Lord would speak with Moses *face to face as a man speaks with a friend* (33:11).

I take the third petition to be a conversation Moses had with the LORD in the tent outside the camp.

Moses essentially prays for two things: the restoration of Israel as the people of God and the LORD's presence with his people. The language of the text is a bit awkward and somewhat confusing. Let's see if we can sort it out.

Moses starts by expressing his concern about whom the LORD will send with him: *You say to me, "Bring up this people," but you have not let me know whom you will send with me* (32:12a). This is a plea for God's presence. The LORD had been with Moses since Mt. Horeb in Exodus 3. On the basis of the grace God had shown Moses, Moses asked God to give more grace: *Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have found favor in my sight"* (33:12b). Moses in effect says, *You know me*.

Now, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight (33:13a). The failure of the second petition shows that Moses did not know *the ways of God*.

But the question remains, *What is God's willingness concerning Israel?* So he adds to his request, *Consider too that this **nation** is your people* (33:13b). Moses is reminding God of God's own words concerning Israel. The word *nation* (*goy*) draws on the language of Exodus 19:6, a word used only here and in 19:6 in Exodus for Israel. Moses is reminding God that unless Israel is his people, God's purpose in making them *a holy nation and royal priesthood* fails.

God replies, *My presence will go with you and I will give you* (singular) *rest* (33:14). Moses understood this promise to be directed to him alone, so he presses further. He refuses to accept the idea of the LORD with him alone and not also with the people. So Moses pleads, *If your presence with not goⁱ, do not bring us up from here* (33:15).

The foundation for Moses' petition is again like the first, *How will it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?* (33:16). If God does not go with them, he will not be known, and Israel will be just like every other nation. Moses appeals again to God's purpose with Israel in the first place (cf. 19:5-6). Israel's *distinction* among the nations functions the same as the concept of them being *a holy nation*. Moses appeals again to God's missionary purpose for Israel, a people distinguished by his presence among the nations and completely devoted to him in the world.

Moses laid hold of God's willingness (33:17). God must be honored as God among the nations of the world. This purpose demands his presence with his people.

D. Fourth petition (34:9): Prayer is a marvelous gift of grace.

The third petition began with Moses asking the LORD, *Show me your ways* (33:13) and ended with Moses asking the LORD, *Show me your glory* (33:18). I am not sure there is any real difference between the two requests.ⁱⁱⁱ This request begs the question, *Had not Moses already seen God's glory?*

Moses' request, perhaps, arises from a tension he feels in his intercessory encounters with God. What has changed for God to agree to go with

Moses and Israel into the land? He has refused to forgive them. What has changed to insure God will not consume them on the way? The question ultimately is, *How can the LORD be present with a sinful people?*

In 33:19-23, the LORD promises to answer Moses request by making all his goodness pass before him and he would proclaim his name, *The LORD*.

How this played out is in 34:6-7. The LORD revealed aspects of his nature and character that Moses had not understood to this point. The LORD passed before Moses and proclaimed his name, *The LORD, The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [to the thousandth generation] forgiving iniquity, and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation (34:6-7).*

In light of this revelation of God, Moses bowed his head and worshiped and offered his final petition: *If I have now found favor in your sight, O LORD, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and sin and takes us for your inheritance (34:9).* At this petition, the LORD said, *Behold, I am making a covenant (34:10).* The covenant is now restored.

Well, wait a minute. Did Moses not ask God to forgive their sin in his second petition? Yes, but not on the basis of any knowledge of the nature and character of God. Moses and Israel had to realize that there was absolutely nothing they could do to atone for their sin. All sinful humans can do is admit their sin before God. Atonement is something that God has to work out because he is in himself merciful and gracious and forgiving. Moses simply adopted God's assessment of Israel. They are a *stiff-necked people (32:9; 33:3)*. For the holy God to be present with sinful people, he must forgive their sin.

This raises another issue, *How can a holy God forgive sin?* It will take the rest of the Bible to answer that question. I'll give you the CliffNotes version now. The answer will be typified in the tabernacle and clearly revealed in the LORD Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who took on human flesh, lived a perfect life, and offered himself as an atonement for our sin and was raised from the dead on the third day, so that those who repent and believe will have the forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Spirit, and eternal life. But make no mistake, if you will not hear Jesus, he will by no means clear the guilty.

3. Israel's repentance^{iv} and restoration (33:4-11): Living in Covenant with God

While the word *repentance* is not used in the text regarding Israel, the essence of repentance seems to be demonstrated in the text. When Moses told the people that the LORD would not go with them to the Land, they heard it as a *disastrous word and mourned and they did not put on their ornaments* (33:4). They were responding to what the LORD told Moses to tell them: *You are stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments that I may know what to do with you* (33:5).

A further indication of repentance is in Israel's response to the LORD's presence in 33:7-11. When Moses would pitch his tent outside the camp and the glory presence would stand at the entrance of the tent with Moses inside, the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door (33:9-10). I think the purpose of this section of text, 33:4-11, is to show Israel's repentance. They now have a willingness to obey and cannot be satisfied apart from the LORD's presence.

Repentance is perfectly stated in Moses' final petition (34:9). Moses simply agrees with God's assessment of Israel. Repentance, like faith, is a conduit through which God's pardon for iniquity and transgression and sin flows into our hearts and transforms our lives. The power of sin is broken; the stain of sin is removed; and the glory presence of God fills our lives.

There would be no renewal of the covenant without repentance (34:10-28). Israel had to learn something about repentance and so do we.

Theologians call repentance and faith inseparable graces. Notice the language. You can't long have one without the other. The first of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* is, *When the Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "repent," he called the entire life of believers to be one or repentance.* Calvin said, *Restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year. In order that believers may reach this goal, God assigns them a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives.*

Conclusion:

By God's grace, he will deal with our sin from act of sin itself to the root causes in the heart. This reality beg us not to run from God but to him. This is what repentance is, a running to God—having God's presence as our greatest desire: *take us for your inheritance* (34:9b).

ⁱ Throughout chapter 32 *Elohim* is used consistently with a plural verb. The people use the plural verb with *Elohim* (vv. 1,4); the LORD uses the plural verb when quoting the people (v8) as does Aaron (v23). Does this suggest the sin is polytheism? The OT sometimes uses *Elohim* with a plural verb when giving a pagan understanding of deity (eg. Abraham speaking with Philistine king, Gen. 20:13). Perhaps the sin is polytheism, but at the very least, it is idolatry. See, Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, 532-32. See also Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 293n7.

ⁱⁱ *With me* is added for clarity but brings obscurity.

ⁱⁱⁱ The two request form the inclusio of Moses' petition and prepares us for God's reply.

^{iv} Hamilton, 558-59. The wilderness accounts in Exodus and Numbers are mirror images of each other. When this text is compared with Numbers 14, repentance becomes apparent. Both texts deal with sin scenes. The sin in Exodus is idolatry. The sin in Numbers is rebellion. In both cases, when Israel saw what the LORD did with perpetrators, Israel mourned (Ex 33:4; Num. 14:9). There is, however, one striking difference. In Exodus, the mourning precedes God's decision to renew the covenant (cf. Ex 34). In Numbers 14, the mourning comes after God's decision to wipe out that entire generation, with the exceptions of Caleb and Joshua. The mourning of Israel in Exodus 33 points to repentance, while the mourning in Numbers 14 points to remorse.